

Employee Spotlight: Brad Lounsbury

June 28, 2016



Brad will be playing Santa on Christmas trains in December 2016.

James “Brad” Lounsbury, an explosives safety officer in the Industrial Safety and Hygiene group, is very specific about the time he spends working on the steam-powered, narrow-gauge Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad. “It’s not a hobby,” he says. “It’s a passion, a labor of love.”

The passion hit him four years ago when he took his small RV to Chama’s Rio Chama RV Park. The people he met there and at the nearby railyard were members of a volunteer group, Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, attending a summer restoration session. They told him about the group’s work and handed him a paintbrush. Right then, he was hooked.

Now a Friends member, Brad is dedicated to the 1880s railroad, a National Historic Landmark and tourist attraction that runs between Chama, N.M., and Antonito, Colo. He serves as a team leader for work projects, including several scheduled for five of the seven weeklong 2016 restoration sessions.

“Everything you do is historic”

Since joining the group, Brad has helped repaint and repair support buildings and railroad cars (box cars, cabooses, flatcars, and tankers), some as much as 100 years old and needing new walls and roofs as well as paint. The work is rewarding, he says, because it immerses him in history. “Everything you do is historic. You’re getting the railroad as close as possible to how it was as a working railroad. And you’re learning—absorbing—how everything changed over the years. When you understand what you’re working on, you do a better job. You become part of it.”

The work can be hard too, he says, recalling an arguably “bad decision” of his to schedule the painting of a black tanker car during the heat of August. “We were on top of it, burning our knees and rear ends,” he laughs.

Brad and the other volunteers try to keep everything as original as possible, although “original” can be problematic, he says, given all the years the railroad was in service. Serious research goes into just the cars—the stenciled letters for the exterior and the paint colors, which can be unexpected. In World War II, for example, paint was scarce, and the railroad used whatever it could get. So the restorers’ choice of, say, Boxcar Red, Rio Grande Gold, or the unlikely Seafoam Green—which Brad found on a caboose’s interior—depends on the era they are trying to match.

The historic Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad evokes the steam-powered past.

This summer, Brad and his crew will restore and paint a water service car, which carried plumbing experts and equipment to railroad support buildings. Other cars on his agenda include two cabooses and a “fishbelly” flatcar, named for the shape of its undercarriage.

And come December, he will be Santa for several of the special Christmas trains, a job he loves because of the wonderful families and children he meets. He says he also meets great people during the work sessions, vintage railroad enthusiasts who travel from all over the country to help. “You come to work,” he says, “but you leave as family.”

A mainstay at the Chama railyard

Brad will join those travelers when he retires next year. He has traded up to a 36-foot fifth-wheel RV and has big plans. “I’ll sell the house,” he says, “and hit the road. There are railroad restoration groups all across the country. I want to see and work with them all.”

Meanwhile, he is a mainstay at the Chama railyard, and his passion is infectious. “Come on up,” he says, looking right at the interviewer. “I’ll put a paintbrush in your hand.”

The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, so the hours spent volunteering for restoration work are tracked with the Laboratory’s Vecinos Volunteer Match Program.

Brad helped restore this caboose to its former glory.

James “Brad” Lounsbury is an explosives safety officer in the Industrial Safety and Hygiene group (OSH-ISH).

Resources

- Learn more about the [Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad](#) at its official website.
- At the Friends of the [Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, Inc.](#), you can read about the group's work and watch videos of the narrow-gauge railroad.

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